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ABSTRACT

This brief paper is a presentation that preceeded another case of considering the ongoing dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of centralized and decentralized school-improvement processes. It attempts to raise a number of questions about the relationship between state-designed standards and accountability initiatives and change and systems theory. Following are three of those questions: (1) How can centralized school-improvement processes overcome the need to be conceptualized at the local level when they are not designed locally? (2) How can the dual nature of the school-improvement process be utilized to facilitate a different model of school improvement that combines the best of centralization and decentralization? and (3) How do change and systems theory impede or facilitate stakeholders' knowledge of the school-improvement process at the local and state level. (Author)

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A Discussion of Change Theory, System Theory, and State Designed Standards and Accountability Initiatives

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Introduction

In a previous presentation, information was presented on state designed standards and accountability initiatives in the Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) service area (McNeal & Christy, 2001). The SEDL service area includes the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Within the region governors, legislators and departments of education have been actively involved in promoting and mandating school improvement efforts since the *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) publication. This publication served as catalyst for all educational stakeholders to become more actively involved in improving public education. The publication also helped to redefine the role of each group of stakeholders. School improvement was no longer considered a local issue but a state and national issue and as a result the school improvement effort became more centralized at the state level. The centralization of school improvement at the state level raises a number of issues relative to change and how it occurs in the educational system.

The research on change theory recognizes that change can occur on numerous levels simultaneously or in concert (Fullan, 1994; Hall, 2002). The research also is clear on the need for change to be just as much a local phenomenon as it is a global one (Sarason, 1990). In addition, the old adage about the best change is that change that arises from the reality of those that need to be changed because it is at that level that change has its most profound impact (Sarason, 1990). The localization of the change process must then be considered as an important factor in the improvement of schools.

System theory indicates that an organization must be understood as a whole entity because the sum is greater than its individual pieces (Hall, 2002). Schools as organizations are complex in nature because of the various pieces; however, it is the collective sum of the pieces that facilitate a clear understanding of the dynamics and challenges associated with school improvement. The applicability of

the system approach to addressing the dynamics and challenges is documented throughout the research on school improvement (Hawley, 1988). The research includes state designed standards and accountability initiatives that focus on individual schools as well as school districts, and the entire state school systems as the unit needing improvement. The research also documents efforts where the unit needing improvement is a single school.

In considering how change occurs in complex organizations such as public schools it is apparent that it occurs simultaneously on several levels but not necessarily as a concert would perform "Mozart's 5th Symphony" but rather like Tina Turner's rendition of "Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling." It is the duality nature of change in complex organizations that makes the change process so unpredictable but rich with meaning. It is also the duality that causes the dynamics and challenges relative to improving public schools in an environment where the biggest stakeholder is now the state as opposed to local school boards. Again, change theory is consistent about the effectiveness of change when it is based on the local reality of those needing to be changed. This implies that state designed standards and accountability initiatives are by their very being born into conflict because they lack local reality. The conceptualization of the school improvement process then is subjected to competing visions of the school improvement process.

The whole school model of school improvement being implemented by the SEDL is founded on the notion that school improvement is a multilevel process with a role for all stakeholders within the system, however, the conceptualization of the school improvement process is localized because the unit of improvement is the individual school (Southwestern Educational Development Laboratory, 2001). This approach also fits the "Theory To Practice Continuum" model used by the presenters to explain the importance localization plays in promoting and facilitating school improvement at the school building

level. The theory links practice to reflection and then back to practice before being linked back again to theory. The continuum model is predicated on change and systems theories.

In summary, the presenters have attempted to present another case for considering the ongoing dialogue between centralized versus decentralized school improvement processes. The presenters have also attempted to raise a number of important questions about the relationship between state designed standards and accountability initiatives and change and systems theory. Three of those questions are identified below:

1. How can centralized school improvement processes overcome the need to be conceptualized at the local level when they are not designed locally?
2. How can the duality nature of the school improvement process be utilized to facilitate a different model of school improvement that combines the best of centralization and decentralization?
3. How does change and systems theory impede or facilitate stakeholders' knowledge of the school improvement process at the local and state level?

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